

Brett Neely and Elizabeth Dunbar, Minnesota Public Radio

Washington — A congressional subcommittee heard testimony Wednesday on a plan to replace the Stillwater Lift Bridge with a four-lane highway span over the St. Croix River.

A proposed bill sponsored by Republican U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann would waive federal environmental laws to allow for a new bridge to be built.

Bachmann testified Wednesday, along with several others, including the mayors of Stillwater and Oak Park Heights.

The House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands referred the bill to the full committee for a vote to be held later.

Subcommittee Chairman Rob Bishop, R-Utah, said he expected it to pass in the full committee and be referred to the full House.

"Honestly, this is a dumb issue," Bishop told reporters after the hearing. "It should have been solved a long time ago. It's being held up by the federal government playing with definitional terms."

A representative from the National Park Service testified against the bill.

If the bill makes its way through Congress and President Barack Obama, it could end the long legal dispute over whether building a new bridge would violate the river's protected status as a Wild and Scenic Riverway. But some say it would also weaken federal legislation aimed at protecting the nation's most pristine riverways from development.

Over the years, environmental groups have fought proposals to build a new bridge over the St. Croix, saying it would harm the area. On Wednesday, a coalition of 24 Wisconsin and Minnesota environmental organizations issued a statement urging House members to reject the proposal.

"Rather than gutting the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in order to push through this over-engineered, massive new bridge, what we need is a true transportation solution — a low-profile, modestly-scaled bridge that reflects the real traffic need and honors the federally-protected status of the St. Croix," the environmental groups wrote in a letter to U.S. Rep. Doc Hastings, a Republican from Washington state who oversees the House Natural Resources Committee.

Although the bill only addresses the bridge over the St. Croix, the groups said it would set a "damaging national precedent."

Oak Park Heights Mayor David Beaudet agrees. In his testimony, Beaudet also said the new bridge proposal was "inflated and out of scale."

But Bachmann has argued that the project cannot be further delayed. The first proposal to replace the 80-year-old Stillwater Lift Bridge would have cost \$80 million, she said. As of February, the estimated cost was \$633 million.

"The St. Croix River Crossing Project is no longer a matter of 'if' it is necessary. That has been determined. This is an issue of how much we will pay in dollars, and possibly lives, before we act," Bachmann said in prepared remarks.

Stillwater Mayor Ken Harycki testified that the Stillwater Lift Bridge needs replacing. He even brought along pieces of the bridge that "fell off."

Harycki said the new bridge would go near a power plant and sewage plant — a non-scenic

stretch of the river.

Bachmann, who represents the area where the bridge would be built, said Minnesota and Wisconsin have lined up funds for a replacement bridge. Both Minnesota and Wisconsin have bonding authority to cover the cost, and the Minnesota Department of Transportation has said it will also rely on about \$160 in federal money.

"The problem really has never been the funding," she said in an interview before the hearing. "The problem has been the roadblocks that have been put up really by radical groups that have decided that they want to see this bridge not built."

Bachmann has bipartisan support on the issue, including from Gov. Mark Dayton and Sen. Amy Klobuchar, both Democrats.

But Democratic U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum opposes the bridge, saying Bachmann's plan is too large and expensive. Sen. Al Franken, also a Democrat, hasn't yet taken a position on the issue.